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ABSTRACT

Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison holds that in the absence of objective standards, people use the attitudes or judgments of similar others to determine the correctness of their own positions. More recent studies have suggested, however, that people often prefer dissimilar comparison targets. A study was undertaken to examine the effect of subjective versus objective judgments on target choice. Undergraduates (N=103), divided into groups on the basis of their perceptual judgments on a minimal groups task, were asked to review the credentials of a college applicant and predict his likelihood of success. Subjects in the objective judgment condition were told they had sufficient information to make judgments while subjects in the subjective condition were instructed to base judgments on personal opinions. Subjects were told that ingroup and outgroup members had evaluated the same applicant as they, and were asked to state their preference for comparing their judgments with ingroup and outgroup members. The manipulation of judgmental nature was found to affect subjects' comparison preferences. The results revealed a strong preference for comparison with similar others in the subjective judgment condition, and for dissimilar others in the objective judgment condition. (NRB)

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TASK CHARACTERISTICS AND TARGET CHOICE IN SOCIAL COMPARISON

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ABSTRACT

Festinger (1954) postulated that to validate their judgments, individual compare themselves with similar others. This expectation is not always supported; sometimes, people seek very different comparison targets. Our study demonstrates that the nature of the judgment influences comparison choice: subjects seek similar comparison targets with subjective judgments, but dissimilar others with objective judgments. The relationship of this finding to relevant research is discussed.

Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison holds that in the absence of objective standards, people use the attitudes or judgments of similar others to determine the correctness of their own positions.

The research of Goethels & Nelson (1973), and Fazio (1979), indicates that people oftentimes prefer dissimilar comparison targets.

Goethels & Nelson's (1973) study examined judgmental confidence as a function of whether similar or dissimilar others agreed or disagreed with the sujbects judgment, and whether a belief or value was at issue. A belief was defined by Goethels and Nelson as a "potentially verifiable assertion about the attributes of an entity"; whereas a value was viewed as "an assertion about the goodness or badness of an entity or a state of affairs." Goethels & Nelson found that when a belief was at issue, agreement from a dissimilar other increased judgmental confidence more than agreement from a similar other. However, when a value was at issue, agreement from a similar other was more influential.

Relating to the distinction between belief and value is the distinction Kelly makes between subjective and objective judgments. When viewing the causation of one's own and other's judgment, Kelly's (1967,1973) attribution model proposes that a person can attribute

his/her judgment to either their own idiosyncratic or biasing characterisitcs, or to the compelling stimulus qualities of the entity being perceived. As Kelly notes, the two attribution categories can be viewed as subjective and objective judgments.

While various theoretical statements have been developed to account for target choice, all appear relevant to a distinction noted recently by Olson, Ellis, & Zanna (1983), who found that subjects were more interested in consensus information when making objective, versus subjective, judgments.

Based on these findings, we might expect subjects to conform with Festinger's hypothesis when making subjective judgments; when the nature of the judgment is objective, however, subjects may be less likely to prefer similar targets--indeed, they might prefer dissimilar targets, to help validate their objective judgment (rather than bolster their subjective belief).

In order to examine the effect of subjective vs. objective judgments on target choice, the following procedure was employed. 103 introductory psychology students served as subjects. They were told that their principal task was to review the credentials of a college applicant and predict his likelihood of success. Before beginning, subjects completed a minimal groups

task (Howard & Rothbart, 1980) that ostensibly divided them into two distinct groups on the basis of their perceptual judgments. All subjects were then given a description of the applicant. In order to enhance objective judgments, half of the subjects in each of the two minimal groups were told that they had a sufficient amount of information to make an objective judgment about the candidate, while the subjects in the subjective judgment condition were told that owing to a lack of information, they would have to base their judgments on personal opinions. All evaluated the applicant on a number of scales such as creativity, motivation, etc., and also wrote a detailed evaluation of his potential.

The subjects were then told that in and outgroup members had evaluated the very same applicant as they. They were then asked to state their preference for comparing their judgments with in and outgroup members. Manipulation checks on the effect of the groups treatment were collected.

RESULTS: Analysis of variance indicated that subjects were strongly influenced by the groups treatment. Ingroup members were seen as more similar, better, etc. In addition, the manipulation of judgmental nature was found to affect subjects'

comparison preferences. Repeated measures analysis of variance revealed a strong preference for comparison with similar others in the subjective judgment condition, and for dissimilar others in the objective judgment condition, $F(1,99)=54.14$, $p<.001$. In addition, all assumed that ingroup members felt as they did about the applicant.

I would now like to briefly comment on the results of a study recently completed which examined motives for the differential comparison preference in the study previously described.

Mettee & Smith (1977), and Fazio (1979) distinguished between two motives for social comparison: construction and validation. Construction involves gaining more information about the object/issue of judgment, e.g., "does someone else know something about the issue that I don't?" Validation refers to seeking support for a judgment, e.g., "did I process the information properly and come to a correct judgment/conclusion?"

This second study was similar in procedure to the one previously described, and results replicated the nature of judgment-comparison choice relationship. In addition, measures were obtained on subjects motive for comparison. Repeated measures analysis of variance

revealed a significant difference for the construction and validation scales, with subjects rating the validation motive as less important than the construction motive. In addition, a significant interaction was found between partner choice and motive for comparison. Subjects displayed a slightly stronger construction (as compared to validation) motive when a similar partner was chosen, while a much stronger construction motive was displayed when choosing a dissimilar partner.

CONCLUSIONS: The results demonstrate that preference for comparison others is affected by the subjective/objective nature of the judgment. Apparently, when objective judgments are made, dissimilar others are useful for providing a different viewpoint and new information, while similar others help bolster subjective beliefs. This finding is consistent with Festinger's theory in that similar others were useful when objective means for judgment validation were unavailable, while extending his theory by displaying a condition under which dissimilar others are useful for comparison (that condition being objective judgments). This finding is useful in that it might help to integrate previous theory and research focused on a central issue of social comparison theory. That issue

being, concepts which account for shifts in the choice of similar or dissimilar comparison persons. The data presented, suggest that the subjective/objective judgment dimension appears to be one such concept.

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Task Characteristics and Target Choice in Social Comparison.
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Mean Preference ratings for Comparison with Similar and Dissimilar Others as a function of Judgment Type.

		GROUP	
		SIMILAR	DISSIMILAR
TYPE OF JUDGMENT	SUBJECTIVE	2.28*	3.60
	OBJECTIVE	3.61	2.39

*Note: Lower numbers represent greater preference for comparison.

Graphic display of interaction between Judgment Type and Group Membership on Mean Preference ratings for Similar and Dissimilar Others.